

Message Text

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AMEMBASSY SANTIAGO

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 BUENOS AIRES 2931

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PGOV, PINT, AR
SUBJECT: ADMIRAL MASSERA'S PROSPECTS

SUMMARY. ADMIRAL MASSERA'S EFFORTS TO BECOME ARGENTINA'S NEXT CARDILLO MUST BE TAKEN SERIOUSLY. HE HAS A GREAT DEAL GOING FOR HIM: ABILITY, ENERGY AND UNSCRUPULOUSNESS IN A POLITICAL FIELD WITHOUT SERIOUS POLITICAL CHALLENGERS. HE HAS MADE INROADS WITH PERONISTS AND POPULISTS AND FOR WHAT IT IS WORTH HAS GRABBED THE HUMAN RIGHTS BANNER. WE DOUBT HOWEVER THAT MASSERA CAN REACH THE TOP ON HIS EFFORTS ALONE. TOO MANY CARDS ARE STACKED AGAINST HIM. HE COULD BE CATAPULTED INTO LEADERSHIP NEVERTHELESS IF ARGENTINA SUFFERED THE KIND OF SOCIAL-ECONOMIC COLLAPSE THAT PUNCTUATES ITS HISTORY. END SUMMARY.

1. ADMIRAL MASSERA'S ENERGETIC AND PERSISTENT CAMPAIGN
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TO BECOME ARGENTINA'S NEXT CAUDILLO HAS REACHED A POINT WHERE SERIOUS POLITICAL OBSERVERS MUST ASK "CAN HE MAKE IT?"

2. MASSERA HAS MANY THINGS GOING FOR HIM. THE FIRST OF THESE IS THAT NO INDIVIDUAL RISES TO COMPARE WITH HIM. IN THIS LAND OF "PERSONALISMO" HIS MOST IMPORTANT OPPOSITION

CONSISTS OF AN ARMY GENERAL--VIDELA--WHOSE MOST ARDENT SUPPORTERS DESCRIBE HIM AS SANE, HUMANE, CAREFUL, PRECISE, APPEALING BECAUSE OF HIS FAMILY-MAN, GOOD-CATHOLIC IMAGE. APPRECIATED THOUGH THESE QUALITIES ARE, THEY SEEM INSUFFICIENT TO SET POLITICAL IMAGINATIONS AFLAME IN ARGENTINA. MASSERA'S OTHER OPPOSITION CONSISTS OF AGING AND DISCREDITED PARTY LEADERS, NO ONE OF WHOM COULD EVOKE MORE THAN THE SUPPORT OF HIS PARTICULAR SEGMENT OF ARGENTINA'S COLLAPSED POLITICAL SYSTEM.

3. BY CONTRAST MASSERA HAS GREAT CHARISMA. IT COMES THROUGH EVEN ON TV. HE IS BRILLIANT AND A GOOD LINGUIST. HE IS INDEFATIGABLE IN HIS POLITICKING AND HE HAS ASSEMBLED A CAPABLE STAFF--MOSTLY NAVY MEN--TO HELP. BABIES GET KISSED AND WREATHS SENT TO FUNERALS AND PERSONAL NOTES DISPATCHED WITH TACT AND EFFICIENCY. HE HAS AN ENORMOUS RANGE OF CONTACTS AND IS ACCESSIBLE.

4. MASSERA IS PRAGMATIC AND NOT BURDENED WITH AN IDEOLOGY. IT DOES NOT TROUBLE HIM, APPARENTLY, TO HAVE BECOME THE JUNTA'S ROGUE ELEPHANT AND TO BE REGARDED BY MANY OF HIS MILITARY COLLEAGUES AS DISLOYAL. WE SUSPECT THAT HIS POLITICS ARE AS FLEXIBLE AS HIS APPROACH TO POLITICS. SHOULD MASSERA EVER BECOME ARGENTINA'S NEW CAUDILLO IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO IMAGINE WHAT POLICIES HE WOULD EMPLOY. IT IS DIFFICULT TO PREDICT A MAN WHO HAS CONFIDENTIAL

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BEEN MORE CLOSELY CONNECTED, PERSONALLY, TO SECURITY FORCES REPRESSION THAN HIS JUNTA COLLEAGUES AND WHO YET WOULD SEND A "HUMAN RIGHTS DELEGATION" INTO THE WASHINGTON LIONS' DEN. HE PRESENTLY SEEKS U.S. "UNDERSTANDING AND SUPPORT," BUT IN SPEECHES HE OFTEN TAKES A TOUGH NATIONALISTIC STANCE AND IMPLIES WARNINGS TO GREAT POWERS.

5. MASSERA'S FLAMBOYANT, AUDACIOUS STYLE TAKES ON GREATER RADIANCE AGAINST THE GOOD GRAY ARMY AND ITS LEADER--WHO, IN ADDITION TO OTHER DISADVANTAGES, HAS ULTIMATE RESPONSIBILITY FOR RUNNING THE COUNTRY AND LITTLE TIME FOR GADFLY POLITICKING, EVEN IF HE HAD THE INCLINATION. (NOTE: WE DO NOT FAULT VIDELA'S ADMINISTRATIVE SKILLS AND HIS OWN EXCELLENT STAFF-EXCEPT IN THE REALM OF POPULAR, VOTE GRABBING POLITICS.) VIDELA HAS THE JOB OF STANDING BEHIND TOUGH POSITIONS; MASSERA HAS THE CHARM OF ANY OPPOSITION LEADER WHO PROMISES RELIEF. HUBRIS IS ANOTHER ARMY PROBLEM, WHETHER CONFRONTING CIVILIAN POLITICIANS OR PESKY ADMIRALS. ALTHOUGH VIDELA HAS TALKED A STATESMAN'S PLAN FOR POLITICAL RENOVATION NOT MUCH HAS HAPPENED, WE THINK BECAUSE HIS WISDOM FALLS ON HARD GROUND. HIS ARMY COLLEAGUES PROBABLY FOR THE MOST

PART DO NOT BELIEVE, DEEP DOWN, IN EITHER THE POSSIBILITY OR THE NECESSITY FOR REFORM AND CHANGE. THEY BELIEVE ALL THEY HAVE TO DO IS HANG ON, UNITED, TO LEAD THE COUNTRY TO GOALS OF THE ARMY'S CHOOSING. THIS COULD BE A SOUND FORMULA FOR ARGENTINA'S PARLOUS SITUATION OF TODAY, BUT IT OFFERS NO TITILLATION TO HORDES OF UNEMPLOYED POLITICIANS WHO MIGHT SEE OPPORTUNITY IN MASSERA'S MACHINATIONS.

6. MASSERA FACES SEVERE DISADVANTAGES AS WELL. HE HAS ALIENATED, EVEN INFURIATED MANY MILITARY MAN THROUGH POLITICKING SHAMELESSLY WITH PERONISTS, LABOR GROUPS AND HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVISTS. BASICALLY TOO ARGENTINA IS ANTI-NAVY. IN A COUNTRY WHERE PERONIST POPULISM IS
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STILL THE LARGEST (ALBEIT MOST AMORPHOUS) SOCIAL POLITICAL MOVEMENT, THE NAVY IS THE "ARISTOCRATIC" SERVICE. RETIRED GENERALS ARE RELATIVELY POWERLESS (EXCEPTIONS LIKE ST. JEAN DO HOWEVER COME TO MIND) AND ALL TOO PLENTIFUL; RETIRED ADMIRALS ARE SIMPLY POWERLESS. PRESTIGE--YES, THEY HAVE THAT, AS WE SEE IN THE CASE OF RETIRED ADMIRAL ISAAC ROJAS, WHO WAS IN HIS DAY HEAVILY POLITICAL AND NOW IN RETIREMENT CAN COMMAND COLUMNS IN NEWSPAPERS

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WHEN HE SPEAKS ON THE INIQUITY OF THE BEAGLE CHANNEL COURT DECISION. RETIRED OFFICERS ARE POWERLESS NEVERTHELESS IN THAT THEY DO NOT CONTROL TROOPS AND GUNS NOR MONEY NOR VOTES. ARGENTINE POLITICIANS REPEAT THAT IT IS UNIMAGINEABLE THAT A RETIRED ADMIRAL PER SE SHOULD HAVE POLITICAL CLOUT. THE POLITICAL QUESTION HERE AND NOW IS THE EXTENT TO WHICH MASSERA CAN CREATE HIS OWN BASE AS A PRACTICAL POLITICIAN, WITH HIS NAVAL CAREER SERVING AS NOTHING MORE THAN A BACKDROP OF SKY BLUE-AND-WHITE RESPECTABILITY. MASSERA PARTISANS WOULD SAY HE HAS DONE THIS ALREADY, OR ALMOST, BUT THE INTELLIGENT DISINTERESTED WOULD PROBABLY REFUSE EVEN TO SPECULATE. (MASSERA HIMSELF SIAD RECENTLY TO AN EMBASSY OFFICER THAT HE ESTIMATED HE HAS TWO YEARS BEYOND RETIREMENT TO PLAY A POLITICAL ROLE.)

7. HOW IS MASSERA DOING SO FAR? WHOEVER COULD MAKE A SINGLE FORCE OF ALL THE POWER CHARGES OF PERONISM NOW SCATTERED WOULD BE A FORMIDABLE FIGURE IN ARGENTINA POLITICS. MASSERA HAS ARDENTLY COURTED PERONIST POLITICIANS BOTH HERE AND ABROAD. HE CERTAINLY HAS NO
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IDEOLOGICAL HANGUPS ABOUT DEALING WITH PERONISTS-- HANGUPS WHICH WOULD MAKE ANY SUCH ASSOCIATION LOATHSOME TO NINE TENTHS OF HIS MILITARY COLLEAGUES--INCLUDING IN THE NAVY. (WORTH NOTING HERE IS THAT IT WAS A PERON ADMINISTRATION THAT JUMPED MASSERA OVER THE HEADS OF SENIOR ADMIRALS TO MAKE HIM NAVY COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF.) WE BELIEVE HE HAS SIGNIFICANT PERONIST SUPPORT ALREADY IN HIS POCKET, ESPECIALLY AMONG THE "VERTICALISTAS." ISABEL PERON IS THE "NAVY'S GUEST" AT AZUL AND, ALTHOUGH THIS IS INCREDIBLE TO AN OUTSIDE OBSERVER, HERE IS STILL A NAME TO CONJURE WITH AMONG NUMBERS OF POOR VOTERS AND IN THE SMALL TOWNS AND CITIES. THIS IS A SIGNIFICANT RELATIONSHIP.

8. MASSERA HAS BEEN ASSIDUOUS IN HIS CULTIVATION OF THE JEWISH COMMUNITY, AND IF HE IS NOT TRUSTED IN THOSE QUARTERS HE WOULD PROBABLY BE PREFERRED AS BEST OF A BAD SITUATION. HE COURTS, HE LISTENS. ALTHOUGH TO THOSE WITH KEEN MEMORIES AND SOME ACCESS TO INSIDE INFORMATION MASSERA'S HUMAN RIGHTS PRETENSIONS MIGHT SEEM LUDICROUS OR EVEN SHOCKING, HE IS AFTER ALL THE ONLY SENIOR OFFICER DEVIATING FROM THE OFFICIAL LINE AND CALLING IN PRIVATE BUT WIDELY DISCUSSED INTERVIEWS FOR THE PUBLICATION OF LISTS DECLARING THE FATE OF THE DISAPPEARED, THE FREEING OF ISABEL AND PERONIST LABOR LEADERS, AND THE NEED TO GET

CONTROL OF "FASCIST ELEMENTS IN THE ARMY." THIS IS
AUDACIOUS AND CYNICAL, BUT IT WOULD OVERLOOK REALITY TO
CONCLUDE THAT THIS STANCE WILL NOT APPEAL TO THE
BEREAVED, THE DESPERATE AND THE FRANTICALLY LOYAL PERONIST
REMANENT.

9. MASSERA'S ACE IN THE HOLE HOWEVER IS THE ECONOMY.
HE HAS PUT DAYLIGHT BETWEEN HIMSELF AND THE POLICIES OF
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MARTINEZ DE HOZ AND HAS DEMONSTRATED JUST ENOUGH POPULIST
CONCERN TO MAKE HIMSELF APPEAR A POSSIBLE IMPROVEMENT
OVER THE STERN MEN WHO CONTINUE TO IMPOSE HARD MEASURES
ON THE COUNTRY'S WORKING MEN AND WOMEN. IT COULD BE
THIS WHICH CONSUMMATES MASSERA'S RELATIONSHIP WITH THE
PERONIST LABOR MOVEMENT.

10. SO WILL HE MAKE IT? WEIGHING ALL THIS WE COME OUT
BELIEVING THAT MASSERA'S INDIVIDUAL POLITICAL ABILITY
CANNOT OUTWEIGH THE INSTITUTIONAL FORCES MILITATING AGAINST
HIS TAKING POWER IN ARGENTINA. MANY SPECULATE THAT IN
A POPULAR VIDELA-MASSERA ELECTION MASSERA WOULD WIN HANDS
DOWN. BUT THERE WILL BE NO SUCH ELECTIONS. AS LONG AS
THE ARMY HAS CONTROL OF THE SITUATION HERE WE BELIEVE
MASSERA HAS NO CHANCE OF EMERGING AS A NEW CAUDILLO. SOME
KIND OF COLLAPSE--ECONOMIC OR SOCIAL--THAT LOOSED THE
ARMY'S HOLD COULD HOWEVER CATAPULT MASSERA INTO SUDDEN
LEADERSHIP. WE SEE NO SIGN OF SUCH A COLLAPSE ON THE
HORIZON, BUT ON THE OTHER HAND ARGENTINA HAS HISTORICALLY
HAD MORE THAN ITS SHARE. MASSERA'S FATE WILL PERHAPS BE
DECIDED BY WHETHER ARGENTINA'S NEXT GREAT CRISIS COMES
WHILE HIS POLLS ARE UP, OR AFTER HE HAS PASSED INTO
RETIREMENT AND OBSCURITY.
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